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SENSITIVE
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEAN](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: DAS MARCIEL REBUTS ALLEGATIONS OF U.S. DISENGAGEMENT IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA IN MEETING WITH MPS VM HUONG

CLASSIFIED BY: Michael Michalak, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: During an at times contentious discussion with EAP DAS Marciel, Ministry of Public Security (MPS) Vice Minister General Nguyen Van Huong criticized the "lack of U.S. engagement" in Southeast Asia in contrast to China's rising power and influence. Gen. Huong said China was focused on Southeast Asia as a means to grow its economy, gain access to oil and exert control over crucial maritime routes. In contrast, the U.S. has been weakened by its focus on Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and North Korea. Huong asked pointedly what the U.S. could offer concretely in response to China's billions of dollars in direct aid and zero percent tax on imports. VFM Huong also criticized U.S. "intervention in the internal affairs of Vietnam" on human rights and argued that continuing criticisms in this area would lead to "hurt feelings" and a weaken the bilateral relationship. DAS Marciel refuted Huong's assertions that the U.S. was disengaged, stressing the Administration's renewed focus on the region. He also highlighted the damage human rights abuses did to Vietnam's reputation as a reformer on the move. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) EAP DAS Marciel, accompanied by the Ambassador and Poloff (notetaker), met with Ministry of Public Security (MPS) Vice Minister Nguyen Van Huong, eight other senior MPS officials and a journalist from the MPS-affiliated newspaper Cong An Nhan Dan (The People's Police) February 5 for a frank, often tense, seventy-five minute discussion.

13. (C) DAS Marciel began by outlining to Vice Minister Huong the Administration's increased engagement with Southeast Asia and the personal commitment of the President and Secretary Clinton to the region. The U.S. has two main goals in the region, DAS Marciel explained, that Southeast Asia be independent, stable, peaceful and prosperous and that we address areas of common concern such as economic development, climate change, peace and security, international crime and narcotics. Gen. Huong stated that he was "not satisfied" with U.S. efforts to counterbalance China's expansionist policies in Southeast Asia. He said pointedly that the U.S. seemed to view platitudes on engagement as action and contrasted this with China's concrete efforts and years of focus on the region. Huong said that Japan, South Korea, Russia and India are also major players in Southeast Asia and insisted that problems would arise if these major powers pursue different goals. Huong asserted that Southeast Asia as a region is not united and faces conflicts due to its many ethnic minorities and religions. Huong, who was very critical of China's efforts to buy off countries in the region, attributed China's focus on ASEAN as an effort to control critical maritime routes, further its economic progress and quench its need for oil. Huong also noted, ominously but without elaboration, that half of all overseas Chinese live in Southeast Asia.

14. (C) Huong argued that China enjoyed certain advantages within the region as a result of shared cultural values, China's economic strength and its dominant military power. VM Huong questioned what the U.S. could do to counter each of these areas. He stated that the U.S. was distracted and weakened by prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and ongoing problems in North Korea and Iran. While the U.S. remains a world power, it does not provide comparable economic assistance to the countries of Southeast Asia, Huong stated, adding that the U.S. may be "on top of the world" but did not lead in economic potential. These considerations all affect the choices and options of Vietnam and other countries in the region, Gen. Huong argued. If pressed, most countries in the region would choose a partner that can help increase economic growth and ensure stability, he insisted, asserting that the U.S. focus on Southeast Asia was symbolic and rhetorical, while China offers billions in direct assistance and zero taxes on imports.

15. (C) While the U.S. may say that it supports a stable and independent Southeast Asia, true independence is difficult given China's proximity, economic might and growing military power. Huong said he had been warning U.S. policy makers on the expansionist policies of China since the early 1990s, noting that he had visited the White House three times, as well as the FBI and the CIA. He said that instead of truly focusing on Southeast Asia, the U.S. had adhered to a "Cold War mentality" and characterized U.S. statements on human rights and democracy as "dogmatic and

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arrogant."

16. (C) DAS Marciel responded forcefully to each of Huong's charges that U.S. was not truly engaged in Southeast Asia, pointing to the strength of our alliance relationships and the robust support of regional friends such as Indonesia and Singapore. It would be a mistake to bet against the U.S., DAS Marciel said. Turning to human rights, DAS Marciel explained that the U.S. supports democracy and human rights because these are both universal values and a core part of who we are. In the spirit of VM Huong's "honest" appraisals, DAS Marciel said that a recent string of arrests and the conviction of political dissidents were not only troubling on their own but seriously called into question Vietnam's commitment to reform.

17. (C) VM Huong bristled at this comment, condemning U.S. interference in Vietnam's internal politics. He defended the recent convictions of political activists, insisting that if a U.S. citizen attempted to overthrow the U.S. government they would likewise be arrested and imprisoned. "If you were in my position, you would do the same thing," Huong said. Huong asserted that many of the individuals that had been convicted had collaborated with U.S.-based exile groups bent on bringing down the GVN and accused the U.S. of ignoring information provided by MPS. Huong said that U.S. continued interference on human rights issues would lead to "hurt feelings" and hinder the bilateral relationship. Taking his characteristically offensive stance, Huong then criticized U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, insisting that Vietnam had been "very forgiving" but that the U.S. did not treat the relationship with understanding or respect. Vietnam does not depend on the U.S. to solve its problems, Huong concluded, "We are independent."

18. (C) DAS Marciel expressed surprise that Huong had chosen to dwell on the Vietnam War. The bilateral relationship had moved forward quickly because the two sides made the wise decision to focus not on the past, but rather on their common strategic interests. He noted that Vietnam is clearly independent, and that in a strong relationship there can still be disagreements, such as we have on human rights. Huong had made it clear that he was not

satisfied with U.S. policy, DAS Marciel said, and there are many things about Vietnam and its policies that are troubling to the U.S. In a mature relationship, partners move beyond areas of friction and focus also on common interests, an approach DAS Marciel noted had characterized the visits over the past six months of MPS Minister Le Hong Anh and Ministry of Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh. DAS Marciel stressed it was important to build on the momentum of these visits and to speak honestly in order to make progress.

¶9. (SBU) On February 6, Cong An Nhan Dan - the MPS-affiliated paper whose reporter attended the meeting - ran a lengthy and mostly accurate article detailing Gen. Huong's criticism of U.S. intervention in Vietnam's internal affairs. The article noted that DAS Marciel cautioned Gen. Huong that recent political convictions and other human rights setbacks could sour the mood in Washington towards Vietnam.

¶10. (U) On Monday, February 8, the Ambassador met with Gen. Huong over dinner to discuss the overall bilateral relationship, including human rights (septel).

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Gen. Huong has long been critical of U.S. policies on democracy and human rights, and is viewed as a powerful hardliner within the GVN. Huong's harsh comments stand in stark contrast to the positive and forward-looking comments offered by DAS Marciel's other Vietnamese interlocutors and are useful reminder that some

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influential senior Vietnamese officials remain distrustful of the U.S. and our motives in the region. END COMMENT.

¶12. (U) This cable was cleared by DAS Marciel.
Palmer